

# Kunapipi

---

Volume 4 | Issue 1

Article 6

---

1982

## Does wongar matter?

Paul Sharrad

Follow this and additional works at: <https://ro.uow.edu.au/kunapipi>



Part of the [Arts and Humanities Commons](#)

---

### Recommended Citation

Sharrad, Paul, Does wongar matter?, *Kunapipi*, 4(1), 1982.  
Available at: <https://ro.uow.edu.au/kunapipi/vol4/iss1/6>

Research Online is the open access institutional repository for the University of Wollongong. For further information contact the UOW Library: [research-pubs@uow.edu.au](mailto:research-pubs@uow.edu.au)

---

## Does wongar matter?

### Abstract

In 1978 a collection of 12 stories entitled *The Track to Bralgu* was published.' This purported to be the work of an Australian Aborigine from the Northern Territory and depicted from within a tribal cultural framework the disastrous impact upon black life of white society in general and large-scale mining ventures in particular.

PAUL SHARRAD

---

## Does Wongar Matter?

In 1978 a collection of 12 stories entitled *The Track to Bralgu* was published.<sup>1</sup> This purported to be the work of an Australian Aborigine from the Northern Territory and depicted from within a tribal cultural framework the disastrous impact upon black life of white society in general and large-scale mining ventures in particular. The book carried

a generous preface by Alan Paton and was favourably reviewed in several major journals and papers around the world as making a major contribution to Aboriginal writing. The author, B. Wongar (B for either Banumbir — 'morning star' — or Birimbir — 'spirit' — and Wongar meaning 'of the Dreamtime'), has also had individual stories published in *Atlantic Monthly*, *London Magazine*, *Les temps modernes* and even *The Australian Women's Weekly*. He also has in print a novel (*The Trackers*) and another collection of stories, *The Dal*, is forthcoming.

No one, however, has met B. Wongar. Doubts concerning his identity have persisted in Australia for some time, fuelled by such events as the appearance of a book of stories about Vietnam in 1972 by a B. Wongar. This Wongar was supposedly an Afro-American veteran who absconded from leave in Australia to blend into the northern Aboriginal tribes. Coincidentally, Alan Marshall (of *I Can Jump Puddles* fame) who wrote the foreword to this book also co-authored a collection of Aboriginal myths with Wongar's unofficial agent, Streten Bozic. Bozic is a Yugoslav who came to Australia via France with a degree in anthropology. He lived in the Northern Territory for a number of years and worked at Gove as a miner.

Suspicious that Bozic and Wongar are actually one and the same were confirmed last year when Robert Drewe published an investigative piece in *The Bulletin* called 'Solved: The Great B. Wongar Mystery'.<sup>2</sup>

A story is a good yarn is a fiction; and fiction has its own truth. Given the social conscience in the stories and their unique imaginative expression of tribal beliefs and attitudes, do we really need to worry about the real identity of their author? For the reasons set out below, I think we do.

On the face of it, Wongar's stories appear to be accurate guides to one section of Aboriginal belief and life style. The only possible error I can find is that, traditionally, tribal blacks are not supposed to mention the name of a dead person until a long time after the death. The fact that characters do in *The Track to Bralgu* may, however, simply be a further indication of the decline of their society.<sup>3</sup>

Imagery is visually apt in the naturalistic sense: a polluted stream smells like a 'burst rotten turtle's egg' (p.39), teeth rattle 'like pebbles in a dilly bag' (p.29), and a derelict cattle-station is 'a deserted ant-hill' (p.25). Images are also a reflection of myths which explain the origin of natural phenomena through acts by heroes of the Dreamtime: the sun is 'like a rock pulled from hot ashes' (p.45), and the willy-willy's pillar of dust 'looks like a great spear thrown from earth and stuck in the belly of a

cloud' (p.25). There are several references to snakes (Jambawal, the cyclone, causes the earth to 'quiver like a beaten snake', p.19) which relate to the Gunabibi/Wonambri creation and fertility-myth cycles of the Rainbow Serpent.

The measuring of distance in 'camps' and 'voices' (pp.38,59) and the coldness of a night by the number of dogs it takes huddling around the campfire to keep you warm (p.79) is authentic, as are the indications of the importance of social transactions and communal relationships (Wonbri steals bread to feed his marooned prison-mates — p.23 — the imprisoned narrator in 'Buwad the Fly' 'dreams' his mother, grandfather and cousin as present and longs to 'rise high up in the air and head straight to my people' — p.53 — Rev. George places great store by his having shaken hands, eaten and drunk with the chairman of CHEAT — p.13 — and the narrator of 'The Miringu' feels the urge to return to his *dua* and *Tjiritja* moiety group lands).<sup>4</sup> (A very nice piece of irony and compelling indication of the author's access to tribal thought is the Rev. George's application of the images of the tribal 'family' and its many conferences to the mining corporation's operations — pp.12-13.)

The overall attitude of acceptance shown by the characters, born of their faith in the abiding and unchanging nature of Dreamtime principles and the resultant inability to cope with social change and its disastrous cultural effects is reported by various anthropologists:

Aboriginal life has endured feeling that continuity, not man, is the measure of all. The cost in the world of power and change is extinction. What defeats the black-fellow in the modern world, fundamentally, is his transcendentalism. So much of his life and thought are concerned with the Dreaming that it stultifies his ability to develop. (Stanner, p.36)

The land is of paramount significance in these stories, and their major claim on lasting literary importance is that they are the first to imaginatively evoke the real and complex sense of immanence and transcendence which the land has for the Aborigine.

The mythic structure of North-East Arnhem Land is an active presence throughout *The Track to Bralgu* — an achievement in itself — and are duplicated by only a few other creative writers. The Wawalag sisters, Wudal and Djangguwul — culture-heroes who shaped the land; Nganug, the ferryman to Bralgu; the dustclouds from dancing spirits; Pingal, the moon and raingiver; Waruk, the bad spirit: all are there. The journey of the soul to Bralgu through swamps of yam is even mentioned (Berndt, p.79).<sup>5</sup>

I should make it clear that I am not claiming any expert knowledge of Aboriginal lore. All of these references can be verified from a cursory check in such basic anthropological texts as C.H. and R.M. Berndt's *The World of the First Australians* and A.P. Elkin's *The Australian Aborigines*: a fact which in itself may say something.<sup>6</sup>

Given this putative authenticity, we may well be inclined to accept the stories for the insights they offer into 'the Aboriginal mind', and, if we have any doubts about the identity of the author, to regard him with indulgence if not grudging admiration (either for his social motives or just his success as a hoaxer). We may even, despite the evidence, feel a reluctance to believe that we have been duped at all.

The main reason for this would be that the basic validity of these stories lies in their moral impact. Not for nothing did the author ask Alan Paton to write an introduction. Like his South African novel, *Cry the Beloved Country*, *The Track to Bralgu* is a cry of outrage scarifying the conscience of Australians, and staining the image of multinational mining corporations. As a political statement, these tales are powerful, and we can well believe that the mystery surrounding Wongar's identity might have been created for fear of retribution by government agencies, mining interests, and Northern Territory whites in general. It is no doubt because of their committed stance, too, that some of these stories first appeared in Jean-Paul Sartre's magazine, *Les temps modernes*.<sup>7</sup>

There is no question that the indictment of white encroachment upon black life in Australia is fundamentally accurate. Nor can there be any doubt concerning the need for an effective imaginatively vivid appeal on behalf of the Aborigines. At least until the beginnings of the last decade, the essay by the veteran anthropologist, W.E.H. Stanner written in 1938, still rang true:

The Aboriginal problem is, indeed, very far away and unreal to the urban and near-urban populations of Australia, and to their leaders. Few of them have ever seen a blackfellow. The disappearance of the tribes is not commonly regarded as a present and continuing tragedy, but (for some curious reason) rather as something which took place a long time ago, in the very early days, and so is no longer a real complication. Nor is it accepted, save by a few people, as a matter for self-reproach. (p.4)

Most of the detribalised and semi-civilised natives would be shown to be badly under-nourished, and to be living precariously from hand to mouth on what in many cases is a wretchedly inferior diet. Many of them are short of the essential proteins, fats, mineral salts and vitamins. The number of Aborigines just over the threshold of scurvy, beri-beri, and other deficiency diseases must be very great. For instance, out of fifty-one children born on a station in central Australia from 1925 to 1929, only ten survived. (p.8)

The provision of so-called 'inviolable' reserves has long been a cardinal principle in Australia. A close scrutiny of the history of reserves would probably show that not one has gone unviolated. Gold-miners, cattlemen, prospectors and others have entered them almost at will. The 'sanctity' of the reserves, though still a catchphrase of official apologetics, is well known to be one of the most bitter fictions in the history of the Commonwealth. (p.11)

Unpalatable though it may be for the white reader, the message of these stories and Stanner's words is supported by the Royal College of Ophthalmologists, which sponsored a health survey in the mid-seventies of all significant Aboriginal settlements, and by the recent World Council of Churches inquiry.<sup>8</sup> The continuing conflicts over land rights and the social and ecological effects of mining operations in the north of Australia also bear out the contemporary nature of Wongar's fiction.

As with many didactic works of literature, social necessity does not always make for artistic virtue. I think it fair to say that, while these stories have their 'harsh, bitter, magical' impact (to quote Paton), they are also frequently flawed by unusual shifts of register. Cutting naturalism or pathos suddenly changes to flippantly surreal satire, such as in the ending of 'Poor Fellow Dingo' when the rain-dancing dog/husband is carted off to have his dance recorded on computer, or in 'The Balanda Mob', which starts with a hot, cruel manhunt and ends with a ludicrous 'ship of fools' fantasy. Sentimentality and *dei ex machinae* in the guise of natural forces are allowed to undercut the tragic human drama (the shooting of Wonbri for looting bread — p.23; the summoning of Jambawal, or the devastation of Ngaliur in 'The Maramara'). The consistency and credibility of the first-person narrator's internal monologue is not always established or maintained (Mogwoi/Rev. George is alternately naïve and cynically knowing; the outside visions of the prisoner in 'Buwad the Fly' are not made to seem natural). Language moves from colloquial ('mob/ tucker/ lingo/ poor bugger') to literary and artificial (the use of the past tense in 'Mogwoi'; the injection of 'please don't disturb' into mention of a sacred waterhole; the carefully shaped sentence about the 'cheerful hunters' — pp.18,30 — etc.).

To me, although they are not unknown amongst Aboriginal writers, these infelicities of style and form indicate the possibility that we should not unquestioningly accept B. Wongar's *bona fides* as a guide to Aboriginal culture. Certainly sentimentality is a common literary tool for people who have been listening to and composing Country and Western songs for years, and it is a common device for appealing to the sympathies of an audience you wish to convert to your cause. Jim Gale

observes that a good proportion of Aboriginal stories are directed at a white readership as a call for recognition of black Australians as fellow human beings. He notes, too, that many of the stories are written in the first person, and that standard English is the norm for literary expression, with occasional experiments in Aboriginal English in dialogue. These stories also often incorporate didacticism as something taken in with the retention of ties to the oral mythic tradition.<sup>9</sup>

My feeling, though, is that we have here a writer who is *using* these techniques in the confidence (sometimes mistaken) that he is master of the language and craft. This is unusual — perhaps unique — amongst Aboriginal writers to date. It is not, of course, impossible that such an accomplished writer should emerge, but the first-person narrative seems like a conscious ploy to distance the narrator from the writer in order to confer greater authenticity on the situation than it might otherwise have. The difference in language keys is not the uncertain experiment of a new or partly-schooled writer trying out English as a creative medium, and the satire is not born of a spontaneous passion, while the metamorphoses possibly are more in keeping with Ovid and Kafka than with Dreamtime myths.

What I am claiming here is that the simple authenticity of the Aboriginal short story is what is lacking in the less successful sections of Wongar's collection — that its very faults reveal its European leanings. The 'blackfellow' makes better jokes, anyway, than the heavy-handed and unnecessary satire of the acronym CHEAT: 'Consortium of Homage Corporation, Exploration International, Alumina Conglomerate and Transcontinental Mining (fictional)' (p.12 footnote). The satire on do-gooders generally and the inappropriate jibe at Amnesty International (pp.74,76) argue a white mind guiding Wongar's pen which fanciful tales of a half-caste raised in Europe and reintegrated into his mother's tribe after at least fifteen years do nothing to explain.<sup>10</sup> A colleague of Paton's, now a professor of English in Australia, confirms these impressions. Having been shown the manuscript of *The Track to Bralgu*, he said:

I thought there was something odd about them. They were written with real concern and social passion by someone who knew the north well — but by a white man.<sup>11</sup>

Even if the stories about Wongar's tribal identity are true, though, we would still have grounds for suspecting his credentials as spokesman for



traditional culture in the Northern Territory. It is not impossible that a writer 'pushing a line' becomes wrongheaded or limited in his view of the total range of issues. The key in this instance seems to be the cumulative effect of Wongar's stories. Jim Gale hears them sounding an occasional positive note, and cites the endings of 'Mogo the Crocodile man' and 'The Tracker' as proof.<sup>12</sup> To my mind (though I would like it not to be so) there is a relentlessly bleak vision in all of these stories, indicated by the succession of images of retreat and entrapment: islands, caves, cell cages, dugouts and sewerpipes. The tracker is indeed leading three evil whites to their doom, but, though he himself could presumably do the same as the young man he is tracking (to whom he had taught the skills of survival), he lacks the same will to escape and looks forward to his own death. The woman in 'Mogo' concludes her futile quest for medical help for her white husband:

He will be back. When he comes to life again he could be a bird...no, he will be a crocodile, swim quickly out of the out of this murk and swim over the sea to one of the islands — no harm will ever come to him there.

Galba, the dog, does not howl any longer; he has come closer to me and leans his head on my arm. We have to beat our way across the river and find some Kakadu country left somewhere — not big, but enough to make a campfire, cook *ganguri* on hot ash and rest. (p.91)

The burden of the whole story, and of others such as 'The Miringu', is that such a spot is no longer to be found. The resurrected man has no human renewal in this world; everyone is reborn as animal, star, or tree. Trees are cut down (p.15); birds find no drinkable water and only burning hot discarded caterpillar tracks on which to rest (p.38). Those spirits that do return to earth in the stories do so only to lead people back to Bralgu; the folk remaining on earth are already spirits (*birimbir*) waiting for death and seeking the only inviolable place they know of:

Whatever might and power they have, these ships will never reach Bralgu; and tonight, as it has always happened since the first *birimbir* came to this country, the morning star will rise in the sky to bring me word of my ancestors. (p.76)

The track to Bralgu, for Birimbir (or Banumbir — 'morning star') Wongar, is one-way. Alan Paton, while he may have missed the possibility of Wongar's being a fake, has accurately reflected the tone of the stories in writing a Foreword that looks to the past and the 'strange beauty of a

dying world' (p.9), and the inexorable vision of Charles Darwin — 'Wherever the white men trod, death pursued the Aborigines' — provides an appropriate epigraph. For the outlook of these tales is negative, retrospective and unidirectional. Despite their moral call-to-arms, they are for all the world like a restatement of the opinions of the nineteenth century summed up in Mary Gilmore's poem 'The Last of his Tribe', or in the words of Henry Lawson:

The American Indian, the African and South Sea savage, and the aboriginals of Australia will soon in the course of civilization become extinct, and so relieve the preachers of universal brotherhood of all anxiety on their account.<sup>13</sup>

Someone called B. Wongar *has* sailed a ship to Bralgu and plundered its mythic powers of regeneration, leaving a distorted and lifeless picture of an ancestral museum culture. This is particularly unfortunate, considering the book's valuable social and cultural insights and its seemingly convincing use of traditional mythology. Admittedly, tragic vision seems justified in the circumstances he depicts, and it is no doubt shared by the human wreckage of black-white encounters.

As the Caribbean novelist, Wilson Harris, and Wole Soyinka the West African writer have shown us, however, myth can be a radical force for cultural renewal because no culture — traditional or modern — is ever static, and oppressed minorities have a subtle contribution to make to the dominant society in a hidden dialogue out of which new composite and dynamic identities can be forged to counter a history of fragmentation and violence.<sup>14</sup>

Contact was never a single tribe's plunging into a social void from parasitism on a single cattle station or town. It was a complex and fluctuating political and cultural interplay between settled semi-'civilised' groups, their relations back in camp, *Myall* blacks from the bush claiming kinship to cash in on new goods and experiences, whites surviving parasitically upon cheap labour and the hunting skills of the blacks, black workers moving from station to station in accordance with tribal migration patterns and their perceptions of the relative merits of various bosses, and a growing component of mixed-race and detribalised youth who, while losing some values, replaced them with others (usually the less desirable characteristics of western life shaped by their limited social horizons). To quote Stanner:

The pathetic fallacy has much corrupted our understanding of this process. Our thinking is far too affected by the cases where violent secondary causes — gross neglect, epidemic disease, extreme malnutrition, punitive expeditions, and the like — in some mixture, wiped out whole peoples or left wretched groups of survivors. So strong are these paradigms of sentiment that we project them even onto large surviving groups of Aborigines not now meeting those extremes. We fail to grasp the zest for life which animates them because we did not see it in those who died so miserably. (Stanner, pp.47-49)

The important thing about the stories is their contemporaneity: they all postdate large-scale bauxite and uranium mining in Australia and it seems that most of them were written after the Darwin Cyclone of late 1974, celebrated in the tale 'Jambawal the Thunder Man'. The two major elements in these stories, then, is that they show the atrocities of racial, social and cultural conflict are still with us and that they ignore, at the same time, — even implicitly deny the possibility of — the expressions of Aboriginal self-assertion increasingly manifest in events of the last decade.

Jim Gale discusses Aboriginal short stories in the context of Third World movements. No self-respecting civil-rights cum black pride worker these days would write stories like Wongar's. Protest stories have their place at the beginnings of liberation movements; they are now obsolete in terms of the progress made in Aboriginal self-determination. Problems still exist, to be sure, but the lone black stockman awaiting the willy-willy on Gurund Downs has apparently not heard of the Gurindji co-operative cattle station and their settlements run by their own leaders after they walked out on Wave Hill. This series of actions over wages and living conditions and rights to own land goes back at least to the Victoria Downs walkout in 1966 and with many other factors in operation since, has produced the Government-backed move to resettle tribal homelands.<sup>15</sup>

The prisoner on the verge of extinction in 'Buwad the fly' comes from the Larrakeah tribe, originally from around the city of Darwin. Berndt claimed they were almost extinct as a group in the sixties, but recently there have been land rights claims to areas of Darwin by people identifying themselves with this tribe. One of the things that has occurred in the last ten years, too, is the redefinition by the blacks themselves of who is and who isn't an Aborigine. Whereas once there was suspicion between tribes and scorn between full-blood initiated folk and the usually more vocal urban mixed-blood, all now are much more united under the

banner of 'black Australians' such that there are now indignant counter-claims to the recently popularised white breast-beating over the killing-off of the native population of Tasmania. This is seen by the mixed-bloods remaining (who see themselves as black) as a plot to deny them their rights.

Wongar is blind to this two-way system. His dispossessed northern tribes in only one case show any sign of having benefited from the white presence (when the mining company and their royalties are used by grandstanding church officials to build a native 'John Flynn memorial' cathedral for an international showpiece). His duped people are not permitted to see beyond their moribund plight to the fact that some tribes are now millionaires several times over and are governing their communal affairs very cannily indeed. In fact, the full-blood population of the Northern Territory has almost doubled in ten years and from a low of 30,000 full-blood or traditional Aborigines in 1964, there are now in excess of 50,000.<sup>16</sup> Such an increase is matched by a growing significant presence of Aboriginal culture in film, dance, music and literature.<sup>17</sup>

Bralgu is not a one-way ticket for isolated and despairing victims. Myth cites several cases of humans who went there and returned, bringing knowledge to mankind and, as Wongar admits, the culture-heroes and ancestors do come back from time to time as guides for the living.<sup>18</sup> Despite appearances, the past has not been static and isolated — Aborigines are not living fossils! Berndt & Berndt cite legends of contact with various cultures from outside Australia.<sup>19</sup> Songs and dances have incorporated new experiences such as the coming of trains, the Chinese, and the Afghans with their camels (which were taken over as a means of transport by the Aborigine).<sup>20</sup> Rituals, while they have been watered down through contact, have also been promoted by the mobility afforded dancers and the officiating at circumcision ceremonies by cars, trucks and chartered aircraft.<sup>21</sup> The hybrid Coranderrk group of early Victoria (an extremely prosperous and serious-minded people almost completely Europeanised) which, like several other groups in the nineteenth century, gave the lie to the idea that the black was incapable of learning white ways, retained its native decision-making processes and customs, and was able to adapt tribal marriage custom by freeing young women to choose their own husbands while preserving the ban on marriage within clan and other traditional proscriptions.<sup>22</sup> The ritual attaching to the All-Father cult in Central Australia went into a decline before and during World War II but was creatively revived as an All-Mother ritual afterwards. Such adaptability is suggested by Wongar's own use of imagery to

link the ancient and modern (surveyor pegs are *Marain* poles (p.56); helicopter blades spin noisily 'like a Bull-roarer' (p.56) and planes flit past 'flashing like spears' (p.21)) but he never realizes the possibilities inherent in this.

The Dreaming, or Dreamtime, is admittedly an essentially conservative and fragile concept, relying for its survival on social stability:

The initiates, the myths, rites and sacred sites are the links; but desecrate and neglect the sites, break the succession of initiates, forget the myths and omit the rites, and the life which comes from the dreamtime can no longer be obtained. As a result the very existence of man is in jeopardy and the mere thought of this fills the surviving elders with a feeling of futility, while the new generation has neither an anchor in the past, a source of strength in the present, nor a sense of direction for the future. (Elkin, p.233)

But the Dreamtime is not and never was a museum culture. It was original time, present time and future time rolled into one — *sacred time* as Mircea Eliade defines it.<sup>23</sup> The Dreamtime myths can be an active animating principle.

This concept is at times suggested in *The Track to Bralgu*, and the stories do to some extent illustrate the importance of the fact that

Aborigines, though subdued by heavy-handed Western dominance, have at least in one tiny section remained masters of their life. Admittedly it is a narrow section *and it is a mental one not directly observable in social life*. Trivial as it may seem, this reserve is vital. On this basis, Aborigines do not just float helplessly on the tide of change but on their own terms, they meaningfully and significantly adjust. They retain, at least intellectually, the upper hand. They identify; they are not just identified.<sup>24</sup>

The final words of the anteater-woman contain a suggestion of this:

It is far better to close the eyes; to pretend that you have crawled under a log in the bush and that around you rushes the sound of the wind caught in a hollow tree. Even if a dingo should come to sniff and roll you to the nearest billabong, it will be the end of the life you have been born for, and not one forced on you. (p.68)

To do complete justice to the complexity of culture contact and the resilience of Aboriginal culture, however, Wongar needs to take to heart the words of A.P. Elkin: '...mythology is not just a matter of words or records, but of action and life,...myth is life-giving' (p.244).

Because he fails to do so, we can suspect that the writer and his stories fall within the critical and cautiously prophetic gaze of W.E.H. Stanner, assessing the change of heart of Australian society of the late sixties

## towards things Aboriginal:

Then there is the remarkable market for all things Aboriginal. Their art, music, dancing and articles of handicraft have been given a new value by an institution that does not deal in sentiment. The demand for the spoken or the written word about the Aborigines, or the film in any form, is insatiable. The old books have become collector's treasures. But the market wants only traditional things. It smacks of a romantic cult of the past, a cult that could end as rapidly and as strangely as it began. Exactly where the market came from I do not know, but I question whether we would be right in reading from the fact of its existence to a proof of any deep-seated change of heart or mind towards the living Aborigines. I see it rather as the sign of an affluent society enjoying the afterglow of an imagined past and as a reaching out for symbols and values that are not authentically its own but will do because it has none of its own that are equivalent. But for all that the market may turn out to be one of the indirect, and therefore the more permanent, forces making for an appreciation of the authenticity of the Aboriginal past and of their complications of life in the present. (Stanner, pp.225-6)

Fortunately his predictions are being exceeded and the Wongar stories are but one of the results of this. They have their limitations as we have seen, and these, as Robert Drewe has so confidently claimed, are the result of their having been written for a white audience by a European migrant to Australia.

No doubt his position as a migrant has given him special insights into the life of Aborigines, just as the ironies of his unsuccessful battles to break into the Anglo-Saxon literary circles of Australia under his own name have probably added emotional fuel to the abrasive tragic vision in *The Track to Bralgu*. One wonders whether he is as conscious of the ironies attending the success of his *alter ego*, which is equally socially and politically based.

A clear product of the sixties and seventies, the Wongar stories have been acclaimed because the curtain had already been raised on the stage of Aboriginal writing. In white literature, it was the time of Xavier Herbert's release of the long-awaited *Poor Fellow my Country*. Publishers, academics, Aborigines and the liberal middle-class reading public (as well as leftist intellectuals in such places as Paris and Belgrade) all looked forward to the emergence of the James Baldwin of black Australia. They *wanted* Wongar to be real, and in that climate reviewers like Tom Keneally were able to overlook the kinds of problems in the stories I have set out above. Readers needed an explanation of 'the black mind' and anticipated that when it came, it would be expressed in terms of spirituality, love of the land and the palpability of the Dreamtime. Whites accepted the criticism of mining as a matter of course, finding in

the stories a handy focus for their bourgeois collective guilt and a confirmation for the trendier souls of their own sense of spiritual loss (having no Bralgu or ancestors of their own) and their inability to reconcile ecology and social welfare with a recession in a materialist economy reliant upon the overseas exploitation of Australian natural resources. The conservatives most likely read *Bralgu* with glee, because it spoke to them of their deepest suspicions about 'commie boong ratbags' and no-hoper flotsam, incapable of either appreciating or benefiting from the profits and virtues of free enterprise.

So Wongar *does* matter, because his tales open to the world a window onto a little-known culture with exotic beliefs such as people changing into animals. This is a dangerous task to perform at the best of times, and when it is attempted by an author who is neither who nor what he appears to be, it is the more hazardous. His identity, even though it must to some extent determine his credibility, matters less, however, than his social vision as revealed through the stories. Wongar matters because the cultural lessons he proffers are, at base, quite different to those he and the publishers would have us learn, and opposed to what black Australians have been teaching themselves and the world over the last twenty years.

The stories, as we have seen, do much that has not been done previously, but we must look forward to the emergence of a truly revolutionary writer who will give Aborigines a place in the modern world: in myth, in the arts and in real life.

## NOTES

1. Wongar's stories have appeared in a number of places. The main source is the collection, *The Track to Bralgu*, London: Jonathan Cape/ Boston: Little, Brown, 1978. References here are to the paperback edition (London: Pan/Picador, 1980). The Bulletin Literary Supplement also includes four tales, and 'Balanja, the Cockatoos' appears in *South Pacific Stories*, (C. Tiffin, ed.) Brisbane: S.P.A.C.L.A.L.S., 1980, pp.70-78.
2. Robert Drewe, 'Solved: The Great B. Wongar Mystery', *The Bulletin*, (Literary Supplement) 21 April 1981, pp.2-5.
3. W.E.H. Stanner, *White Man got no Dreaming*, Canberra: Australian National University Press, 1979, p.25. All further references to this work will be included in the text.
4. C.H. & R.M. Berndt, *The World of the First Australians*, Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1964, p.416. The *dua* moiety have the island of Bralgu as their territory. Several writers attest to the importance of social ties: 'In Aboriginal Australia,

- kinship is the articulating force for all social interaction....' (Berndt & Berndt, p.91). All further references to this work will be included in the text.
5. Berndt & Berndt, p.416.
  6. Berndt & Berndt, *op. cit.*; A.P. Elkin, *The Australian Aborigines* (revised fifth edition), Sydney: Angus & Robertson, 1979.
  7. *The Bulletin*, *op. cit.*, p.4.
  8. *National Trachoma and Eye Health Program*, Sydney: Royal Australian College of Ophthalmologists, 1980; various newspaper reports, e.g. *The Age*, 11 August 1981, p.12.
  9. Jim Gale, 'The Aboriginal Short Story viewed from the Third World Perspective', paper presented at the CRNLE/SPACLALS conference on South Pacific Fiction, Flinders University, April 1979, revised typescript 1980.
  10. *The Bulletin*, *op. cit.*, several references.
  11. *Ibid.* (Derek Marsh), p.4.
  12. Jim Gale, *op. cit.*, p.12.
  13. 'The New Religion' in *Henry Lawson* (Brian Kiernan, ed.), St. Lucia: University of Queensland Press, 1976, pp. 1980, p.82.
  14. See for example, Harris's *Sleepers of Roraima* and *Age of the Rainmakers* (London: Faber & Faber, 1970, 1971) in which the creative potential of minority Amerindian cultures is explored, and Soyinka's *The Interpreters* (London: Heinemann, 1965) where traditional West African myth blends with western cultural patterns.
  15. Stanner, p.231. Many of these developments are discussed in detail in R.M. Berndt's edition of conference papers, *Aborigines and Change: Australia in the Seventies*, Canberra: Australian Institute for Aboriginal Studies, 1977. The constant theme of these papers is the tenacity with which Aborigines have retained control over a measure of their own lives and how they are now seizing opportunities to create their own future according to the continuous traditional modes of thought and lifestyle adapted to modern circumstances.
  16. Elkin, *op. cit.*, pp.384-5.
  17. One thinks of Jimmy Blacksmith, *The Last Wave*, *Storm Boy*, *Walkabout*, and *Manganinnie*. Films and plays have been produced by black Australians and the writing of verse continues. A growing number of white writers are aware of and using traditional forms and stories in creative ways (for example, Les Murray and Patricia Wrightson).
  18. Berndt & Berndt, pp.409-420, mention Ngurunderi (S.A.), Jalngura (N.E. Arnhem). Stanner cites the myth of the good father who, dying at the hands of his evil son, gives fire to humanity. This is but one example of a myth with the capacity for suggesting regeneration.
  19. Berndt & Berndt, pp.8-9. Weaving, stone houses, pottery and tamarind trees are mentioned in songs referring to Bajau and Makassar seafarers who occasionally settled on the north coast of Australia.
  20. Berndt & Berndt, p.325.
  21. Wallace in Berndt (ed.), *Aborigines and Change*, *op. cit.*, pp.77,80.
  22. Stanner, p.309.
  23. Mircea Eliade, *Myths, Dreams and Mysteries*, London: Collins/Fontana, 1968.
  24. Kolig in *Aborigines and Change*, p.36.